

RIVER EDGE

Birthday boy uses his big day to help another kid

BY AIMEE LA FOUNTAIN
Correspondent

River Edge resident Jack DeSavino celebrated his 12th birthday by raising the funds necessary for twins Garrett and Connor Fenner to receive a service dog.

Jack is high functioning on the autism spectrum. Two years ago, North Star Foundation gave him a Golden Retriever service dog named Nardi.

"Our dogs serve as therapeutic tools to help our children with their social or emotional challenges," said Patty Gross, founder and executive director of North Star Foundation.

North Star Foundation pairs dogs and children for socialization while both are young. The foundation's dogs are raised as service dogs.

"We only work with litters or pups specifically bred for temperament, as well as soundness, and only after they also pass a temperament test given at age seven weeks," Gross said.

Having Nardi has helped soothe Jack when he's feeling anxious or stressed.

"Nardi knows when he's getting upset and when Jack's getting upset he goes right to Nardi," said Kathleen DeSavino, Jack's mother.

Jack's autism makes it hard for him to communicate, but Nardi's presence has presented a channel for social development.

"When we have Nardi with us out in public, strangers tend to be more patient and want to find out about the dog," DeSavino said. "Jack then has some conversation with people that he normally wouldn't have."



LEFT PHOTO COURTESY OF DESIREE FENNER; RIGHT PHOTO COURTESY OF KATHY DESAVINO

Above left, twin brothers Connor (left) and Garrett Fenner will receive a service dog with the help of funds raised at River Edge resident Jack DeSavino's birthday party. Above right, DeSavino with his service dog, Nardi.

"Our dogs help the typically developing to overcome their fear of differences and find the courage to talk to a child with a communication challenge. The North Star dog helps structure the conversation," Gross said.

For Jack's birthday this year, he told his mother that he wanted to help provide a service dog for another kid.

"He said, 'I want someone else to love their dog like I love Nardi,'" DeSavino said.

Connor and Garrett Fenner of Louisville will receive their Labradoodle named Hope in May as a fifth birthday present and as Garrett prepares for major surgery.

"She's coming right at the perfect moment," said the boys' mother, Desiree Fenner. "I

already feel bonded, like [the DeSavinos] are part of my family. They have no clue the blessing they've offered to the boys and to me."

Garrett was dual-diagnosed with the genetic condition Fragile X Syndrome and autism. He's nonverbal and suffers from autonomic dysfunction, as well as a fluctuating heart rate.

Garrett spends much of his time in the hospital as he can't eat and is on oxygen full-time.

Hope's job is to look after both Garrett and Connor. She'll alert Fenner when Garrett needs medical attention and will comfort Connor during stressful situations.

"I chose Connor and Garrett's placement because their single mom, Desiree, needed extra and

expensive support from us to create this placement," Gross said. "Desiree has her hands quite full with her boys as Garrett's medical condition is quite serious."

Despite his struggles, Garrett is full of life, according to his mother.

"He's such a strong little boy for the cards he's been dealt. It just doesn't stop him," Fenner said. "Both of my boys are such a blessing to me."

Connor chose the service dog's name.

"Connor wants to name her Hope because Hope brings hope," Fenner said. "[Hope] is all we talk about. He can hardly wait, he's just bursting with energy."

Connor helped his mother pick out red accessories for

Hope and is looking forward to taking care of her.

"That's really given Connor a major sense of empowerment, which is a great relief to me," Fenner said. "Being included in his brother's care gives Connor a sense things are OK."

DeSavino estimates Jack's birthday raised about \$2,000 for North Star. She credits Jack's Roosevelt School classmates with the party's success.

"The kids in his school are so kind and really get him. It's an amazing group of kids," she said. "If he didn't have the friends that he has, he wouldn't be the happy, lovely kid that he is."

The idea to ask for donations in lieu of gifts is reflective of Jack's character.

"He's very creative and kind to other people," DeSavino said. "He thinks of other people a lot. He's a good kid."

"It's so beautiful for [Jack] to recognize there's another boy out there who needs a service dog and to want to do something about it," Fenner said. "It puts me in a cheery mood, which isn't easy for me to do."

DeSavino hopes to raise awareness of how service dogs assist children with disabilities. She said, "We've done so many things for Jack, [but] I believe in my heart that service dog has made more of a difference than any of the other things we've done for him."

For more information on North Star Foundation, visit northstardogs.com.



PHOTOS/RICH FORMICOLA

Above left, Jack DeSavino (in blue shirt) bowls with his friends at his birthday party. Above right, Christie and Cara sign the card for Garrett and Connor Fenner.

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MARKETPLACE 1-800-472-0157
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EDITORIAL 201-612-5400
FAX 201-612-5421
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